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ABSTRACT

This study explored the effects of service learning and community service on college undergraduates' cognitive and affective development, investigating how service enhanced learning. Longitudinal data were collected from 22,236 students attending a national sample of baccalaureate-granting institutions. Most had entered college as freshmen in fall 1994 and were followed up in fall 1998 percent. About 30 percent had participated in course-based community service during college; 46 percent participated in other forms of community service. The study assessed the impact of service learning and community service on 11 dependent measures (academic outcomes, values, self-efficacy, leadership, career plans, and plans to participate in further service after college). The qualitative portion of the study involved individual and group interviews with faculty and students on three different campuses. The study found that service participation showed significant positive effects on all 11 outcome measures. Service participation had its strongest effect on students' decisions to pursue service careers. Most students believed their service made a difference. Students' degree of interest in the subject matter was the most important factor associated with positive experiences. Both faculty and students developed a heightened sense of civic responsibility as a result of the experience. (Contains 13 references.) (SM)

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Executive Summary

How Service Learning Affects Students

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Purpose

The two major goals of this study were: 1) to explore the comparative effects of service learning and community service on the cognitive and affective development of college undergraduates and 2) to enhance our understanding of how learning is enhanced by service. These questions were explored by means of a quantitative longitudinal study of a national sample of students at diverse colleges and universities and a qualitative study of students and faculty who participated in service learning at a subset of these institutions.

Method

Longitudinal data were collected from 22,236 college undergraduates attending a national sample of baccalaureate-granting colleges and universities. These students were followed up during the fall of 1998; most of them had entered college as freshmen in the fall of 1994. Thirty percent of the students participated in course-based community service (service learning) during college, and an additional 46 percent participated in some other form of community service. The remaining 24 percent did not participate in any community service during college. The impact of service learning and community service was assessed on 11 different dependent measures: academic outcomes (three measures), values (two measures), self-efficacy, leadership (three measures), career plans, and plans to participate in further service after college. Most of these outcomes were pretested when the students entered college as freshmen.

Four additional outcome measures were examined for a subsample of students for whom standardized test scores (GRE-Verbal, GRE-Quantitative, LSAT, MCAT) were available. Only students for whom freshmen SAT or ACT scores were available were used in these analyses (sample sizes ranged from 358 for the MCAT to 1,028 for the GRE).

Multivariate controls were used for both freshmen characteristics and institutional characteristics (size, type, selectivity, etc.) before the comparative impact of service learning and community service was assessed on the eleven student outcomes.

The qualitative portion of the study involved in-depth case studies of service learning on three different campuses. Individual and group interviews with faculty and students, together with classroom observations, were conducted at each site.

Principal Findings

- Service participation shows significant positive effects on all 11 outcome measures: academic performance (GPA, writing skills, critical thinking skills), values (commitment to activism and to promoting racial understanding), self-efficacy, leadership (leadership activities, self-rated leadership ability, interpersonal skills), choice of a service career, and plans to participate in service after college. These findings directly replicate a number of recent studies using different samples and methodologies.

- Performing service as part of a course (service learning) adds significantly to the benefits associated with community service for all outcomes except interpersonal skills, self-efficacy and leadership. Positive results for the latter two outcomes were borderline (i.e., $p < .05$).

- Benefits associated with course-based service were strongest for the academic outcomes, especially writing skills.

- Results with graduate and professional school admissions tests were generally non-significant, with one exception: service participation can have a positive effect on the student's LSAT score, but only if the student is able to discuss the service experience with the professor.

- Service participation appears to have its strongest effect on the student's decision to pursue a career in a service field. This effect occurs regardless of whether the student's freshmen career choice is in a service field, a non-service field, or "undecided."

- The positive effects of service can be explained in part by the fact that participation in service increases the likelihood that students will discuss their experiences with each other and that students will receive emotional support from faculty.

- Both the quantitative and qualitative results suggest that providing students with an opportunity to *process* the service experience with each other is a powerful component of both community service and service learning. Compared to community service, taking a service-learning course is much more likely to generate such student-to-student discussions.

- Better than four service-learning students in five felt that their service "made a difference" and that they were learning from their service experience.

- The single most important factor associated with a positive service-learning experience appears to be the student's degree of interest in the subject matter. Subject-matter interest is an especially important determinant of the extent to which (a) the service experience enhances understanding of the "academic" course material, and (b) the service is viewed as a learning experience. These findings provide strong support for the notion that service learning should be included in the student's major field.

- The second most significant factor in a positive service-learning experience is whether the professor encourages class discussion.

- The frequency with which professors connect the service experience to the course subject matter is an especially important determinant of whether the academic material enhances the service experience, and whether the service experience facilitates understanding of the academic material.

- The extent to which the service experience is enhanced by the academic course material depends in part upon the amount of training that the student receives prior to service participation.

- Qualitative findings suggest that service learning is effective in part because it facilitates four types of outcomes: an increased sense of personal efficacy, an increased awareness of the world, an increased awareness of one's personal values, and increased engagement in the classroom experience.

- The qualitative findings suggest that both faculty and students develop a heightened sense of civic responsibility and personal effectiveness through participation in service-learning courses.

- Both qualitative and quantitative results underscore, once again, the power of reflection as a means of connecting the service experience to the academic course material. The primary forms of reflection used were discussions among

students, discussions with professors, and written reflection in the form of journals and papers.

- Both the qualitative and quantitative findings provide strong support for the notion that service-learning courses should be specifically designed to assist students in making connections between the service experience and the academic material.

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Related HERI Publications

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